Études irlandaises

35-2 (2010)
Traduction : pratique et poétique

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Référence électronique
Patrick Zuk, « Translating National Identity into Music: Representations of “Traditional Ireland” in A. J. Potter’s Television Opera Patrick », *Études irlandaises* [En ligne], 35-2 | 2010, mis en ligne le 30 décembre 2012, consulté le 31 décembre 2012. URL : http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/1977

Éditeur : Presses universitaires de Rennes
http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org
http://www.revues.org

Document accessible en ligne sur :
http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/1977
Document généré automatiquement le 31 décembre 2012. La pagination ne correspond pas à la pagination de l'édition papier.

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Pagination de l’édition papier : p. 81-97

1 The period between 1922 and 1965 has aroused highly equivocal responses from historians of Irish culture and society, and will doubtless continue to engender debate. Although early governments of the Irish Free State can be credited with significant positive achievements, not least of which was the rapid restoration of social and political stability after the War of Independence of 1919-1921 and the bitterly divisive Civil War that followed, scholars have tended nonetheless to present this era in a rather negative light. Their reasons for doing so are not difficult to understand. Post-independence Ireland was poor and backward, and confronted social problems of daunting magnitude. Widespread unemployment and hardship caused Irish men and women to emigrate *en masse* in search of a better life elsewhere: between 1951 and 1961 alone, some 400,000 people left the country[1]. Commentators also point to the comparative poverty of the country’s intellectual and cultural life at the period, which was exacerbated to no small extent by the peculiarities of Irish Catholicism. For reasons that are readily comprehensible given the country’s troubled history of colonial occupation and religious persecution, the Catholic hierarchy quickly moved to assert its dominance after Independence The influence of religion seemed omnipresent, to the point where the country struck some foreign observers as being virtually a theocracy: the French writer Camille Bourniquel described feeling enveloped in “an atmosphere of militant clericalism” when visiting Ireland[2]. This triumphalist tendency intensified yet further after the appointment as Archbishop of Dublin in 1940 of the formidable and ultra-conservative John Charles McQuaid, who has been characterised by a recent biographer as being “obsessed with the need to control all aspects of [Irish] public and private life[3]”.

2 The mentality characteristic of Irish Catholicism that consolidated around this period combined, in Lawrence MacCaffrey’s pungent formulation, “the worst of two worlds: the sexual obsessions of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and the intellectual bankruptcy and authoritarianism of Latin Catholicism[4]”. This development was greeted with dismay by many Irish intellectuals, particularly if they had cherished the hope that liberation from colonial rule would stimulate radical cultural renewal. Much of the finest Irish writing of the period – such as the novels and short stories of Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain, or the early plays of Paul Vincent Carroll, Denis Johnston and Mary Manning – exudes intense frustration with the provincial narrowness of outlook prevalent in the country. The discontents that these writers articulated could be safely ignored, however. The bland official image of the country promulgated by its political and clerical establishment excluded all references to the alienation experienced by its intellectuals, as well as the grim material realities of poverty and mass emigration. Instead, it emphasised Ireland’s lofty sense of spiritual mission and the supposedly exceptional piety of its inhabitants, who were steadfast in their adherence to “traditional” Catholic values and resistance to pernicious modern ideas. This authorised self-portrait of “Traditional Ireland” has been described scathingly by the eminent Irish historian J. J. Lee as a “highly selective social construction of reality” sustained by hypocrisy and “self-deception on a heroic scale[5]”.

3 For obvious reasons, this construct was unlikely to have found any embodiment in the work of the country’s major creative figures. The present article is concerned with an artwork that appears to constitute a unique exception: the opera *Patrick* (1962), by the composer A. J.

Potter (1918-1980) and the poet and playwright Donagh MacDonagh (1912-68), which was commissioned by the Irish national broadcasting station Radio Telefís Éireann in 1961 when it expanded operations to introduce a television service[6]. Although the work has little intrinsic artistic merit, it is nonetheless of considerable interest to the cultural historian insofar as it reflects many of the dominant preoccupations of Irish society at the period, particularly in matters relating to religion and sexuality, as well as Ireland's ambivalent relationship with "pagan" Britain. An exploration of the factors which may have led MacDonagh and Potter to write a work of this nature also sheds interesting light on the difficulties arising from censorship and clerical dominance that confronted Irish creative artists at the period.

4 The idea of commissioning an opera originated with the recently-appointed Director-General of RTÉ, Edward J. Roth, who had previously worked for NBC in the United States and was involved in the production of Gian Carlo Menotti's pioneering television opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* in 1951. His choice of Potter and MacDonagh as co-authors was unsurprising, as both men were figures of considerable eminence in an Irish context. MacDonagh enjoyed an international reputation as a poet and playwright, while Potter was generally regarded as one of the most promising Irish composers of his generation. Roth stipulated that the subject matter for the opera had to be "definitively Irish" [*sic*] and suggested that it should be based on the life of St Patrick, a fifth-century missionary from Roman Britain who became the country's patron saint. Roth's concept was prompted by the fact that the putative 1500th anniversary of the death of St Patrick would fall in 1961[7]. As he was undoubtedly aware, the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, had planned a series of grandiose festivities to mark the occasion – including a nine-day Patrician Congress in Dublin to demonstrate the Irish people's "renewed appreciation of the gift of the One True Faith' from the saint[8]". Roth evidently envisioned *Patrick* as the broadcasting station's major contribution to the celebrations and encouraged MacDonagh to devise a work of suitably epic proportions. The latter acquiesced in Roth's suggestion, though he baulked at the idea of a historical costume drama[9]. He chose instead to depict what one might describe as the saint's twentieth-century avatar: the central character is a young Irishman whose experiences explicitly evoke parallels with his prototype. MacDonagh's Patrick is also of British birth, but grew up in Ireland. As we learn in the course of the opera, he experienced visions as a young man in which Irish and coloured immigrants in Britain, as well as English people themselves implored him to return there and act as the instrument of their salvation. He concludes that he has been entrusted with a spiritual mission that he cannot refuse: he goes to England and awaits some further intimation of its nature, working as a labourer to support himself.

5 The action opens in a public square in what is evidently a large urban centre in England, with a church to one side. A group of West Indian and Irish immigrant labourers is subjected to a racially motivated attack by a gang of Teddy boys. Patrick appears on the scene and rebukes them for fighting in front of a church. The Teddy boys make to beat Patrick up, but the Irishmen urge them to leave him alone, explaining that he is a kind of holy fool:

> Don't touch Patrick, he's a very good man;
> He may be mad, but he's a very good man.
> He smokes no tobacco, he drinks no drink,
> He fights no fights and he courts no girls,
> He does his work and he says his prayers,
> And he hears voices.

6 The Teddy boys are unimpressed by this explanation, but are distracted by the timely entrance of a bevy of young nurses, whom all the men ogle admiringly. Witnessing this scene, Patrick expresses concern that this encounter may prove an incitement to sin. In a long soliloquy, he reveals his conviction of having been entrusted with a divinely-appointed mission to bring salvation to godless Britain, and particularly to his fellow Irishmen living there. Peace is restored and the Irishmen, West Indians and Teddy boys to repair in amity to the local pub. Patrick hails this turn of events as "a miracle of God', but declines an offer of a double scotch as he is teetotal.

7 A young Jamaican nurse Bella is intrigued by this rather singular Irishman and invites him back to her flat for tea. During their conversation, Bella experiences a mounting physical attraction and attempts to seduce him. Patrick repulses her advances with disgust, declaring that the Virgin Mary is the only woman who is worthy of his devotion. He makes a precipitate departure, leaving Bella in a state of dejection. Patrick emerges into the street and sees the various groups of men we have previously encountered entertaining the young nurses in the local pub. He proceeds to harangue them with a lengthy sermon on the subject of the seven deadly sins, which meets with a somewhat less than enthusiastic reception from his audience. His admonishments are not entirely without effect, however: the Teddy boys declare that Patrick has taught them the importance of tolerance and that they will henceforth abjure violence. Patrick receives this news with gratification.

8 Bella enters and, in a furious outburst, denounces Patrick as a hypocrite and informs the assembled company that he has just made improper sexual advances to her. The mood of the crowd changes abruptly and the men challenge Patrick to refute her allegations. Patrick replies that Bella has misrepresented his declaration of purely platonic, Christian love for her, but the crowd refuses to believe him and threatens him with lynching. In an impassioned monologue, Patrick declares his willingness to accept martyrdom, but appeals to Bella to tell the truth. Unable to withstand the force of his eloquence, Bella breaks down and confesses her lie. Patrick declares that his mission is complete and the time has come for him to continue his holy work elsewhere. He breaks into an exultant setting of the traditional Irish prayer known as St Patrick’s Breastplate, in which all the members of the cast join. The opera concludes with shots of the assembled company processing into the church on the square, dipping their fingers into the holy water font in the porch and making the sign of the cross.

9 As will be evident from this summary of the action, MacDonagh saw the opera as an opportunity to make a major artistic statement about his native country: he aimed to explore the nature of Irish national identity, to portray Ireland and the Irish in their finest aspects and to create a hero who personified the noblest manifestations of the Irish character. He also wished to engage with large issues of relevance to an Irish audience: emigration and the experiences of the Irish in exile; the nature of Irish Catholic spirituality and what this might have to offer the modern world outside of Ireland. The construct of “Irishness” which emerges from the opera is of considerable interest, as it relates very closely to the image of “Traditional Ireland” described by Lee.

10 One immediately striking fact about the opera, in view of Roth’s stipulation that it should deal with an Irish subject, is that it is set in Britain rather than Ireland, and that Irishness is largely defined through contrast with negative British stereotypes. Patrick and the Irish labourers are portrayed as decent and peaceable, conditioned by their Catholic faith to be tolerant and live in harmony with immigrants from other countries. The only indigenous Britons that they encounter are Teddy boys, who gained widespread notoriety only a few years before the opera was written through their involvement in race riots in London instigated by “Keep Britain White” mobs[10]. MacDonagh allows this minority sub-culture to represent British society, or, at any rate, the British working class, in its entirety. The Irish are thus depicted as social underdogs in a hostile environment, compelled to endure ignominious ill-treatment of the kind which had previously been meted out to their fellow countrymen under colonial occupation. To be fair to MacDonagh, while his depiction of the Irish immigrant community was highly selective in the aspects he chose to emphasise, it was by no means completely unfaithful to reality. In the 1950s it was not unknown for advertisements for jobs or for rented accommodation to include such stipulations as “No blacks, no dogs, no Irish”, and there is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that the Irish were subject to discriminatory treatment in Britain during this period[11].

11 These considerations notwithstanding, it is also evident that MacDonagh’s portrayal of Britain and the British is coloured by negative stereotypes which had circulated in Ireland for over a century. As Lawrence McCaffrey has observed, an energetic attack on British values formed an intrinsic part of the strategy of many nineteenth-century Irish nationalists from Thomas Davis onwards. In contrast to the “spiritual” Irish, Englishmen were characterised as

coarse materialists, indifferent to higher values[12]. This dichotomy became a commonplace in subsequent discourse. In his celebrated address "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland", delivered in 1892, the eminent writer and Gaelic scholar Douglas Hyde drew a sharp contrast between the richness of Gaelic culture and the Irish language and the tawdry products of Victorian mass culture, such as music-hall songs and "shilling shockers". Similarly, in an essay of 1901, Yeats described Gaelic culture as a precious remnant of an almost extinct high civilisation which flourished before British rule and the corrupting influence of British materialism, claiming that "where the Gaelic tongue is still spoken […] the people live according to a tradition of life that existed before commercialism, and the vulgarity founded upon it[13]". Representations of Britain as a soulless and debasing place also pervaded much literature in Irish at this period. The gifted Pádraic Ó Conaire created highly disturbing evocations of London in his novel *Deoraidheacht* [Exile] (1910) and in short stories such as "Nóra Mharcuis Bhig", a stark tale of an Irish girl who is disowned by her father when he learns about the dissipated life she has led in England.

12 These negative stereotypes of the British had originated, of course, in response to stereotypical notions of the Irish prevalent in nineteenth-century Britain, which seemingly justified denying Ireland a greater degree of political autonomy. As Declan Kiberd has aptly observed:

> Victorian imperialists attributed to the Irish all those emotions and impulses which a harsh mercantile code had led them to suppress in themselves. Thus, if John Bull was industrious and reliable, Paddy was held to be indolent and contrary; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the English were adult and manly, the Irish must be childish and feminine. […] The political implications were clear enough […]: the Irishman was incapable of self-government[14].

13 Given attitudes of this nature, it was perhaps inevitable that the construct of Irishness invented by Irish cultural and political nationalists was predicated to a considerable extent on a rejection of "materialistic" British traits, and on affirmation of Irish qualities that appeared to have no value in John Bull's philistine scheme of things.

14 In Ireland, these stereotypes acquired a fresh piquancy after Independence. By this time, a devout, loyal Catholicism had come to be regarded as a quintessential component of Irish national identity[15]. The deeply spiritual nature of the Gael was a cherished conviction of Irish Catholics at the period: it was widely held that Ireland had an exalted spiritual mission, offering an inspiring example of a people adhering staunchly to the principles of their Catholic faith and thus providing a bulwark of support to the Holy See in its battles with communism, atheism, materialism and the evils of modernism – a heroic mode of national self-imagining that recalls the manner in which nineteenth-century Russian Slavophiles liked to envision the role of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in defending mankind against similar perils. An excellent example of this mythologizing tendency is provided by a radio broadcast made by Éamon de Valera on 6 February 1933, shortly after he acceded to executive power. Its main theme was Irish Catholicism's world-historical role in "helping to save Western Civilisation" from the evils of materialism. In the turbulent twentieth-century, he claimed, Ireland could render the world "a service as great as that she rendered in the time of Columcille and Columbanus, because the need of our time is no whit less[16]".

15 These ideas were a recurrent theme in the public pronouncements of John Charles McQuaid after he became Archbishop of Dublin in 1940. McQuaid's thinking was dominated by two narrow preoccupations which had a far-reaching influence on the attitudes of Irish Catholics. The first was a profound suspicion of the Protestant Anglo-Irish minorities in Ireland and, by extension, of everything to do with predominantly Protestant Britain. The second was the sinfulness of sex. McQuaid's spared no efforts to preserve his flock from moral contamination from both sources and safeguard Ireland's spiritual purity. Under his influence, Irish Catholics were actively discouraged by their clergy from associating with Protestants or attending institutions such as Dublin's oldest university, Trinity College, over which Protestant influence was perceived to be dominant. Britain, because of its predominantly Protestant population, was regarded as a highly dangerous environment for Irish Catholics, not least because of the supposed laxity of its moral standards, with the availability of divorce

and contraception. McQuaid and his colleagues displayed much pious concern for the Irish immigrant community in Britain: in a particularly extreme manifestation of Catholic zealotry, the bishops of Dromore and Achonry were moved to write to the Taoiseach Seán Lemass in 1965 urging the introduction of a ban on persons under eighteen years of age emigrating there on the grounds that they were "entirely unprepared for live [*sic*] in a pagan and amoral environment" and that "emigration in their case could almost be called a proximate occasion of mortal sin[17]". McQuaid was instrumental in setting up the Irish Emigrants Chaplaincy Scheme (1957-82), which dispatched Catholic priests to Britain to minister to the needs of the Irish community there. "Africa is an easy apostolate in contrast", he confided *a propos* of this scheme to a visiting missionary bishop – a highly revealing comment that indicates the intensity with which his negative views of the country were held[18]. McQuaid evidently regarded these priests as continuing the work of the so-called "English mission" which had commenced after the Reformation in an effort to regain adherents to the Catholic faith.

16 These modes of envisioning Britain and Ireland unquestionably inform the libretto of *Patrick*. MacDonagh inverts the habitual misprision of the colonizer for the colonized, presenting Britain and everything British in a deeply negative light. Patrick and his fellow Irish navvies are intended to be perceived as latter-day victims of soulless British materialism, exploited for their cheap labour. The Britain in which they find themselves is a drab and hostile urban wilderness – "a land of fear" Bella calls it – unlike the pastoral idyll of Ireland, which is lovingly recollected by Patrick in his monologues. Its benighted, thuggish inhabitants are completely bereft of any sense of higher moral values until their animality is tamed under Patrick's "civilising" influence: MacDonagh indulges in the delicious fantasy of allowing the erstwhile colonial victim to succeed at last in vanquishing the colonizer, not through an ignoble recourse to physical force, but solely by virtue of his superior spiritual endowment. Patrick's divinely appointed mission, it transpires, is nothing less than to perform in reverse the feat accomplished by the historical St Patrick some fifteen centuries previously, and reintroduce the One True Faith, kept alive in Ireland since the Reformation, to modern "pagan" Britain. Although not a priest, Patrick is clearly intended to be perceived as a kind of missionary similar to his historical prototype, and his depiction, I would suggest, is only fully comprehensible in the light of this social context.

17 MacDonagh's libretto thus conveys a number of unsubtle subtexts. Ireland may be materially poorer than modern Britain, but is immeasurably richer on a spiritual level. Britain is a "pagan and amoral environment", plagued by the social ills of racial disharmony and violent gang cultures. The solution to these ills can only be found in Catholicism and the Irish have a God-given spiritual mission to assist Britain to this realisation. The Irish, even if poor and downtrodden, need not feel inferior to their former colonizers, but instead should regard them with pity and compassion for being deprived of the benefits endowed by Catholicism. Ireland may have been subjugated politically by Britain, but is now in a position to colonize it spiritually.

18 In a letter to a fellow composer Gerard Victory, Potter informed him that *Patrick* "was supposed to show the world the deeply spiritual side of the Irish people[19]" – a remark which makes explicit the link between the representation of Irishness in MacDonagh's libretto and the hallowed notions of Gaelic spirituality that I have described. The opera's central character is clearly intended to represent the finest flower of this Irish "deep spirituality". The qualities with which MacDonagh endows him are the typical attributes of "holiness" as envisioned in the Irish popular imagination at the period: his simple, unquestioning faith and special devotion to the Virgin Mary, his unconcealed aspiration to sainthood or martyrdom, his ascetic avoidance of tobacco and alcohol, and above all, his energetic resistance of sexual temptation.

19 The prominence of this last character trait reveals very clearly the extent to which the opera reflects the contemporary social ethos. As has been extensively documented, the preoccupation of the Irish Catholic hierarchy with matters of sexual morality engendered a climate characterised by extreme puritanism[20]. Patrick's horror of unchastity faithfully exemplifies an attitude to sexuality which the Irish Catholic hierarchy strove to inculcate in their flock. The result was a mentality that viewed sexual desire with an exaggerated revulsion.

When Bella tries to seduce him, Patrick dramatises the perceived threat in the most extreme terms:

> You are temptation that all saints have known.
> St Anthony repulsed you with a groan,
> Augustine lean as Lazarus feared your power
> And whipped his rebel body for an hour.

20 This scene carries a very high degree of emotional charge and, interestingly, constitutes the dramatic climax of the opera up to this point. It is clear that to Patrick the loss of his virginity represents a far greater threat than the racial attacks of the Teddy boys, of whom he appears quite unafraid. His rejection of Bella is surely also intended to symbolise the Irish Catholic rejection of the debased British sexual mores that the Irish Catholic Church found so abhorrent. MacDonagh intended Patrick’s repulse of Bella to be perceived as a morally exemplary, even heroic act: the chaste Irishman demonstrates his spiritual valour in rejecting the sexual permissiveness prevalent in contemporary “pagan” Britain.

21 As will be clear from the foregoing account, MacDonagh’s libretto for *Patrick* is deeply problematic from a contemporary standpoint and would probably make it impossible to revive the work. The most fundamental difficulty, perhaps, is that it is so much a product of its time and place: the subject matter of the opera lacks a more universal significance that transcends its setting. The narrow nationalist and religious concerns that were peculiar to Ireland at the period are unlikely to have much resonance for anyone who is not Irish; and MacDonagh’s engagement with them is not only mawkish and sentimental, but his treatment also presents a highly tendentious image of modern Britain. It is unlikely that most viewers could accept the opera’s simplistic message that an old-fashioned Irish-style Catholicism is a panacea for “pagan” Britain’s social ills; and the closing scene, with its implied mass conversion of the British “heathen” to the One True Faith, would strike them not only as frankly incredible, but as a particularly rebarbative piece of Catholic triumphalist propaganda.

22 There are other difficulties. The first of these concerns MacDonagh’s conception of the opera’s hero. It is a notoriously difficult task for a dramatist to create a credible positive character, let alone one who is supposed to be the living embodiment of a lofty national spirituality and unalloyed goodness. MacDonagh’s Patrick is not a very compelling creation. For Irish audiences, he conjures up a favourite object of ironical amusement, the sanctimonious “holy Joe”, who devotes much energy to ostentatious public shows of piety. Not infrequently, he produces an impression that quite subverts his creator’s conscious intentions, sometimes to inadvertently comic effect – as when he declines the Teddy boys’ offer of alcoholic drink and meekly requests lemonade instead. The other protagonists are little more than crude stereotypes. The rapid transformations of outlook they experience under the influence of Patrick’s “holiness” strain psychological credibility and the manner in which these are portrayed would grate on the sensibilities of most contemporary viewers – especially the closing scene, which shows Bella demurely following Patrick into a church, having been “cured” of her sinful sexual desires, and the reformed Teddy Boys breaking spontaneously into a rousing Irish hymn.

23 The libretto also has serious technical shortcomings. It is composed in verse throughout, like MacDonagh’s poetic dramas. In the more successful of these, such as *Happy as Larry* (1946), MacDonagh managed to negotiate the difficulties inherent in the genre with considerable success, and although his verse is notably uneven, the work has sufficient vitality to transcend these defects[21]. The verse in *Patrick*, however, abounds in instances of clumsy scansion and cacophonous rhymes that not only seem inept, but produce moments of ludicrous bathos. For example, after Patrick succeeds in quelling the opening gang fight, Bella addresses him as follows:

> And yet you spoke, and there was peace,
> And without calling the police.
> Let’s celebrate. You come with me
> And I will make you coffee or tea.
> Coffee or tea or a slice of cake,

Or bread and butter – which will you take?
And you must tell me why you’re here
In a foreign land, in a land of fear.

24 These jingling couplets illustrate the extent to which MacDonagh’s critical self-awareness deserted him. As if by some perverse instinct, he almost invariably lapses into hair-raising banalities at precisely those crucial moments of high tension when a more elevated style is demanded by the dramatic context. Patrick’s monologue proclaiming his sense of divine mission includes a jarring reference to the fact that he formerly worked in a bacon factory: MacDonagh presumably intended this as an allusion to the historical Patrick’s work as a swineherd in his youth, but it was surely one that it would have been better to omit. Similarly, few modern directors would be prepared to countenance the doggerel sung by the leader of the Teddy boys when he addresses the assembled Irish and Jamaican immigrants thus:

Who asked you to leave your bleeding Isle?
Who asked you to make your bleeding pile?
Taking our digs,
Filling with nigs
Every chipper here –
Who asked you here?
Why can’t you disappear?

25 By composing the libretto in verse, MacDonagh presumably intended to impart a heightened emotional intensity to the utterances of his characters, in a similar manner to his poetic dramas. The audience’s willingness to accept the theatrical convention of characters speaking in verse is, of course, completely dependent on the quality of the poetry. And while it has often been observed that interesting music can carry undistinguished texts, especially in an operatic context, this is only true up to a point: if they are particularly poor or flatly quotidian, their banality can become intrusive and undermine the composer’s attempts to express exalted feelings – as happens here.

26 This employment of verse also seems to sit uneasily with MacDonagh’s attempted naturalistic treatment of the subject matter. MacDonagh clearly envisioned the opera as a vehicle for serious social comment and criticism. He aimed to depict “real life” of a kind that would be familiar to many Irish viewers – evoking the material hardship and social handicaps experienced by their countrymen in Britain. The Irish immigrants are depicted working, brawling, drinking in a pub and pursuing the opposite sex, and are clearly intended to be perceived by the audience as, if not people exactly like themselves, then at least as types familiar to them from their own experience. MacDonagh’s dramatic strategy in including scenes of this kind may also have been influenced by the fact the opera was being composed for the medium of television, which lends itself readily to the creation of naturalistic illusion. This aim is inconsistently pursued, however. Some scenes of the opera, such as Bella’s attempted seduction of Patrick, or the closing scene in which he is threatened with lynching by the crowd, degenerate into cheap melodrama. The writing here acquires a histrionic shrillness that seems particularly unsuited to television, which requires a more understated style of acting. Any attempt at naturalistic depiction is also abandoned in the large-scale choral dance scene in which the Irish and Jamaican immigrants engage in an elaborate stage fight that was almost certainly inspired by *West Side Story*.

27 The more incondite features of the libretto present a puzzle. MacDonagh was neither unintelligent nor ungifted, and had considerable experience of writing for the stage. It is difficult to credit that he was unaware of its shortcomings. One also wonders how he regarded the entire project. On the face of it, in accepting the commission for *Patrick*, he was prepared to acquiesce in devising a dramatic work that amounted to little more than an empty piece of Catholic-nationalist propaganda glorifying “official” Ireland. The libretto betrays not even the faintest hint of critical distance from the subject matter. It is important to emphasise that there is no indication in his correspondence with Potter about the work that any overt pressure was brought to bear on him to compose the text in the way that he did. If he harboured any feelings of dissatisfaction with the project or with the completed opera, he kept them to himself. His

letters to Potter also seem to indicate that he set about his task wholly in earnest. When the opera was finally broadcast, he wrote to congratulate Potter in effusive terms, telling him that he thought it "tremendous, especially the music, which I would like to hear several times[22]".

28 The fragmentary evidence at our disposal permits of several conflicting explanations. It is possible that the libretto for *Patrick* was written with complete sincerity as the expression of a devout Catholicism, but, on the whole, this seems unlikely. The scenario that MacDonagh devised several years previously for the ballet *Careless Love*, his first collaboration with Potter, with its explicit vindication of the artist's right to sexual freedom and its open condemnation of narrow-minded Irish puritanism, is scarcely suggestive of orthodox Irish Catholic attitudes. The most charitable (and perhaps the most persuasive) explanation is that MacDonagh adopted Roth's proposed subject, even if he found it uncongenial, because he would presumably have been reluctant to turn down such a prestigious commission. He may even have considered it professionally awkward to do so, since he was a popular and frequent broadcaster on Radio Éireann and thus feared that a refusal could have unpleasant repercussions. On the other hand, he probably realised that he would have comparatively little freedom of manoeuvre in treating this subject matter. He must surely have expected that any dramatic work engaging with a religious subject – particularly one launched with as much publicity as *Patrick* – would almost certainly come under close scrutiny from Catholic officials, if not from McQuaid himself[23]. It would have been unthinkable to portray the national saint from a critical or ironic perspective, though it could have opened up very interesting dramatic possibilities[24]: in the social climate in which MacDonagh was writing, this would have been to invite trouble. Strict censorship operated in Ireland until the late 1960s and Catholic vigilante groups took it upon themselves to act as guardians of public morality, lodging formal complaints about books or plays that they considered indecent.

29 Art works with religious themes appear to have been subjected to especially close surveillance by the Catholic Church. Three years after *Patrick* was broadcast, the bilingual Irish writer Criostóir O'Flynn lost his job as a primary school teacher because of charges of blasphemy and indecency levelled against his play *The Order of St Melchizedek*. Although this affair had far-reaching and highly unpleasant consequences for O'Flynn, as he recounts it in his autobiography, it was not without a number of farcical aspects[25]. O'Flynn (who was born in 1927 and is still alive at the time of writing) is a devout Catholic, whose religious beliefs seem impeccably orthodox. His play is a wholly serious attempt to depict the difficult conflicts experienced by practising Christians between the contending claims of faith and rationality. Its ingenious plot portrays the predicament of a Catholic priest serving in a remote parish, who receives an unexpected visitor, a strange young woman, one Christmas night. She confides in him that she is pregnant, but a virgin, and has been sent to him to care for her until the birth. The priest is thus confronted with bizarrely improbably circumstances that explicitly recall the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ and must struggle to make of them what he will.

30 The play was rejected by the reading panel of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin when O'Flynn submitted it for consideration, the anonymous readers' reports describing it in excoriating terms as "disgusting", "vulgar" and "obscene". When he eventually succeeded in getting it produced at the 1967 Dublin Theatre Festival, he not only received hostile letters, but the Dublin newspaper the *Evening Herald* chose to publish an anonymous missive (signed "Outraged Dubliner") condemning the play as "a disgrace to Catholic Ireland". Although one might imagine from these comments that the play was explicitly pornographic or otherwise offensive, it is, in fact, nothing of the kind: a contemporary reader would be entirely perplexed to understand how it could have attracted such opprobrium. Not long afterwards, O'Flynn learned that he was to be let go from his job, ostensibly because student numbers in the school where he worked were declining – a transparent pretext which was blatantly untrue. He was in no doubt that his superior had been instructed to get rid of him by Archbishop McQuaid[26]. O'Flynn's experience was not unique. The novelist John McGahern was similarly forced to quit his job as a teacher three years earlier in 1965 when controversy erupted over his novel *The Dark*, which includes a scene portraying the attempted molestation of a young boy by a

priest[27]. These episodes give some idea of the pressures to self-censorship that MacDonagh may have experienced, and if he chose to play safe with *Patrick* and avoid tampering too much with the subject matter, then he can hardly be blamed for doing so. The foregoing exploration of MacDonagh’s motives is, of course, highly conjectural, and in the absence of firm evidence it is not possible to decide the question one way or the other, but the most generous view would be to regard the libretto as a regrettable production written under unusual circumstances.

31 A libretto of poor literary quality does not necessarily prevent the writing of a successful opera, even if it makes the composer’s task more difficult. Many operas with unsatisfactory libretti have remained in the repertoire because of the vitality and richness of their music. The tendentiousness of MacDonagh’s libretto presents an insurmountable problem, however, and it is difficult to imagine how it could have been overcome satisfactorily. Unfortunately Potter’s score is not sufficiently distinguished to compensate for its shortcomings. It has all the characteristic faults of his weakest works: there are few memorable ideas and it is poorly structured, giving the impression of being largely improvised; the phrase structure is excessively predictable and monotonous, while the harmonic language tends to be rather turgid. One has the sense that his imagination was not engaged by the subject matter, as the music only flickers intermittently into life. Matters were probably not helped by the fact that the score had to be composed at breakneck speed due to MacDonagh’s dilatoriness in finishing the libretto. The only scene in the entire work which is persuasive is Bella’s brief aria “Now sorrow has my heart”, which she sings after Patrick has rejected her. In spite of its extreme simplicity and understatement, the music here is genuinely affecting and gives a tantalising glimpse of what Potter might have been capable under other circumstances.

32 In the context of the present discussion, Potter’s musical characterisation of the protagonists is of considerable interest, as it largely reinforces the racial stereotypes of the libretto. The Irish characters are readily identified as denizens of “Traditional Ireland” by the music that is assigned to them, which employs stylised melodic contours and ornamentation deriving from Irish folk music, a time-honoured means of connoting “naturalness” and “wholesomeness”. The music of the urban British characters, by contrast, refers to various genres of British light music, often in a rather parodic way. The rollicking tunes given to the Teddy boys are obviously descended from music-hall songs, their spiky chromaticism and brashly astringent harmonisations lending them an aggressive edge which is wholly absent from the dignified and lyrical “Irish” music. The contrast between the gentle, peaceable Irish and the uncouth British could scarcely be drawn more sharply. Patrick’s “heroic” and “spiritual” nature is projected through material employing a severe diatonic modality, explicitly reminiscent of plainchant. By contrast, Bella’s sensual and hedonistic personality is portrayed in music of a lush chromaticism. In this manner, Potter establishes a somewhat obvious tension between “chaste Irish” diatonicism and “sinful British” chromaticism which operates throughout the score, the strident bitonal sonorities associated with Patrick in his more fraught moments presumably being intended to symbolise the conflicts he experiences when his diatonic “purity” is threatened with compromise. Much of Bella’s music recalls pre-war styles of British light music, especially the operettas of Ivor Novello and Noel Coward. Both her music and, to an even greater extent, that of the Teddy boys is tinged with a deliberate vulgarity. The traditional dichotomy between the “spiritual” Irish and the “material” British is here recreated in musical terms.

33 As in MacDonagh’s case, it is difficult to tell what Potter’s private attitude to the project might have been. To judge from his letters, he regarded organised religion with sceptical indifference (he was nominally a member of the Church of England, but was not notably devout), and was particularly unsympathetic to Catholicism and nationalism in their Irish manifestations. One consequently wonders how he could possibly have found the subject matter of *Patrick* congenial. He also had little patience with the attitudes towards sexuality promulgated by the various Christian churches and is therefore unlikely to have empathised with the resolutely chaste hero of the MacDonagh’s libretto. If he had reservations about its quality, however, he was in a rather difficult position. For one thing, he may have felt it inadvisable to voice criticisms of its crudely propagandistic features as he was a Protestant. There were also various

practical considerations. The project had already run into delays that were not of his making, but Roth nonetheless placed him under great pressure to produce the score on time. He may have considered it infeasible to request that MacDonagh make substantial revisions or revise his basic conception: he needed to get down to work as a matter of urgency if he was to meet his deadline. He may also have been unwilling to risk offending MacDonagh or putting their working relationship under strain. His unpublished correspondence suggests that he regarded himself as the subsidiary partner in the collaboration, and there appears to have been no opportunity to discuss practical issues concerning the libretto's suitability for operatic setting as it was being written. It would have been unthinkable under the circumstances for him to have withdrawn altogether. For one thing, it would have occasioned much awkwardness to withdraw from such a high-profile project, and he may have feared that if he did so, the opportunity to have an opera performed – an extreme rarity for Irish composers at the period – might never come his way again. He may also have been reluctant to make difficulties because his work as an arranger and broadcaster for RTÉ represented a substantial proportion of his income, and the station afforded Irish composers' sole access to professional performing groups.

34 *Patrick* met with a rapturous critical reception on the occasion of its first screening, which of itself affords eloquent testimony concerning the contemporary intellectual climate and the extent to which the authorised self-portrait of "Traditional Ireland" found widespread and uncritical acceptance. The *doyen* of Irish music critics, Charles Acton declared that the opera represented an act of "courage and national maturity" in its depiction of a modern Irishman with a vocation to pacify racial tensions in Britain. He continued in a similarly effusive vein:

> There are up to a dozen numbers that could easily become popular outside the opera; they have tunes and individualities that linger in the memory even after a first hearing; especially as they are so apt for the words, and are highly evocative and emotive. In fact this is the first… composition of Dr Potter's that I admire wholeheartedly, and feel worthy of the largest possible audience. […] I know that I am easily moved, and often enough by the sentimental and the obvious. Perhaps that was why I was in tears by the end. Perhaps not. Either way, this is a major contribution to our culture. It must be repeated several times at least. It must be staged here and elsewhere. It is a real credit to T.E. [Telefís Éireann] and to Dr Potter[28].

35 These accolades notwithstanding, *Patrick* did not succeed in establishing itself in the repertoire. It was never staged either in Ireland or elsewhere and RTÉ only broadcast it one further time in 1971. It was to be over a decade before Potter had the opportunity to compose another opera, *The Wedding*, which is far more successful and treated a subject much better suited to his creative gifts. This savagely ironical portrayal of small-town life portrays the inhabitants of "Traditional Ireland" in a thoroughly unflattering light – confirming one's suspicion that Potter entertained rather different views of his adopted country than those embodied in MacDonagh's libretto.

Notes

1 Ultan Crowley, *The Men Who Built Britain*, Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 2001, p. 139.
2 Camille Bourniquel, *Ireland*, trans. John Fisher London, Vista Books, 1960, p.134.
3 John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland,* Dublin, O'Brien Press, 1999,p. 327.
4 Lawrence J. MacCaffrey, "Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism: A Study in Cultural Identity"*, Church History*, 42, 4, 1973, p.524-534, p.533.
5 See J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.651-2.
6 For an account of the circumstances surrounding the commission, see Patrick Zuk, "A. J. Potter 1918-1980: The career and creative achievement of an Irish composer in social and cultural context", PhD dissertation, University of Durham, 2007.
7 The year of Patrick's death has been the subject of much controversy: see David N. Dumville, *Saint Patrick, AD 493-1993* Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1999.

8 John Cooney, *op. cit.*, p.345.
9 *RTV Guide*, 12 March 1965.
10 See Alan Travis, “After 44 years secret papers reveal truth about five nights of violence in Notting Hill”, *The Guardian*, 24 August 2002.
11 See Ultan Crowley, *op.cit.*, p. 132-3; Catherine Dunne, *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* Dublin, New lsland Books, 2003, p.11-14.
12 Lawrence J. MacCaffrey, *op. cit*., p. 533.
13 W. B. Yeats, “Postscript”, in Lady Augusta Gregory ed., *Ideals in Ireland*, London, At the Unicorn VII Cecil Court, 1901, p. 105.
14 Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1995, p.30.
15 For a discussion, see Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, London, Fontana, 1981, p.27ff.
16 *Catholic Bulletin*, 23, 3 (1933), p. 241-243.
17 See Damian Corless, “The secret’s out… it seems we’re all a little bit bonkers”, *Irish Independent*, 16 December 2004.
18 John Cooney, *op. cit*, p. 320.
19 Potter to Gerard Victory, 5 February 1963.
20 For a discussion, see J. H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland,* Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1980, p. 24 *sqq.*
21 For a discussion of the technical shortcomings of MacDonagh’s verse, see Robert Hogan, *After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of the Irish Drama since “The Plough and the Stars”,* Minneapolis, University of Minesota Press, 1967, p.155.
22 MacDonagh to Potter, 20 August 1964.
23 It was common knowledge that the Archbishop kept the contents of all radio and television programmes under close surveillance with the assistance of a network of informants: see John Cooney, *op. cit.*, p. 327ff.
24 One thinks, for example, of William Golding’s fascinatingly ambiguous portrayal of the character of Dean Jocelyn in his novel *The Spire*, which leaves the reader constantly unsure whether Jocelyn’s sense of divine mission is authentic or should be attributed to megalomania.
25 The account that follows draws on Criostóir O’Flynn, *A Writer’s Life*, Dun Laoghaire, Obelisk Books, 2001, p. 4-69.
26 Cristóir O’Flynn, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
27 John McGahern gave an account of this affair in his autobiographical *Memoir*, London, Faber 2005, p. 249-252.
28 Charles Acton, *Irish Times*, 19 March 1965.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Patrick Zuk, « Translating National Identity into Music: Representations of “Traditional Ireland” in A. J. Potter’s Television Opera Patrick », *Études irlandaises* [En ligne], 35-2 | 2010, mis en ligne le 30 décembre 2012, consulté le 31 décembre 2012. URL : http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/1977

Référence papier

Patrick Zuk, « Translating National Identity into Music: Representations of “Traditional Ireland” in A. J. Potter’s Television Opera Patrick », *Études irlandaises*, 35-2 | 2010, 81-97.

À propos de l’auteur

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Résumés

This article discusses the television opera *Patrick* by Donagh MacDonagh and A. J. Potter, which was commissioned for the opening of Telefís Éireann in 1961, in relation to the contemporary social context and constructs of Irish national identity prevalent at the period.

Cet article est consacré à l’opéra *Patrick* (de Donagh MacDonagh et d’A.J. Potter), commandé pour l’ouverture de la chaîne de télévision nationale irlandaise, Telifís Éireann, en 1961. L’opéra est étudié par rapport au contexte social de l’époque et en lien aux conceptions de l’identité nationale qui prévalaient alors.

Entrées d’index

Mots-clés : culture et société irlandaise des années 1960, musique irlandaise, opéra
Keywords : irish culture and society in 1960s, irish music, opera